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Between Forster and Gilroy: Race and (Re)connection in Zadie Smith's *NW*

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ABSTRACT: *This article interprets Zadie Smith's novel* NW *(2012) as an attempt to connect E. M. Forster's famous dictum "only connect" with Paul Gilroy's concept of "conviviality."* NW*'s representation of two friends who are constituted by boundaries instilled by class, race and ethnicity, but who also contest those limits, points to the difficulties faced by many contemporary European minorities. In* NW*, the idea of race collaborates with that of ethnicity and class to form a strongly racialized logic through which the immigrant's upward mobility is subtly yet decisively affected.* NW *suggests that Gilroy's convivial society is only possible with Forsterian, interpersonal connections. Only after Leah and Natalie, the novel's central characters, rekindle their friendship, can they set in motion the novel's closing act of justice.*

Zadie Smith's fourth novel, *NW* (2012), closes with an act of justice. Leah Hanwell and Natalie Blake, who had been friends in high school in the London neighborhood of Willesden, suspect that a former classmate of theirs committed a murder and contact the police. First, they send in an anonymous tip but, finding the experience "anticlimactic," decide to make a call instead.[1] Leah and Natalie, who had become alienated during college and subsequently grew apart, connect again while calling the local police station. The narrator captures their act through a reference to their past familiarity and intimacy, which is consequently recreated in the present, with the image of "two heads pressed together over a handset" (p. 294). In this paper, I read this

description as a sign of emotional, physical, and personal connection between the two women and take it as my guiding image. I argue that *NW* can be read as an attempt to relate E. M. Forster's famous dictum "only connect" from his novel *Howards End* (1910) with Paul Gilroy's ideas on "conviviality" as articulated primarily in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004).[2] Reading together these two concepts—or perhaps intellectual ideals—suggests that creating and sustaining communities that emanate from interpersonal relations can resist the exclusionary and discriminatory practices of racism in contemporary, postcolonial Europe.

Since the publication of her debut novel *White Teeth* (2000), Zadie Smith has been popularly and critically acclaimed. Academic reception has focused largely on Smith's engagement with multiculturalism and identity-construction in postcolonial societies, with one commentator referring to *White Teeth* as "multiculturalism for the millennium."[3] Critics have also been quick to examine her engagement with the canon of English and English-language literature, especially her indebtedness to Forster's ethical humanism.[4] In this paper, I argue that *NW* applies Forster's humanism to the interpersonal relations that have become strained in the current sociopolitical climate. The interpersonal connections that are formed help build a path to Gilroy's idea of a convivial society, which can be regarded as an antidote to exclusionary measures taken and logics operating in postcolonial Europe. The personal (re)connection that is central to *NW*'s narrative can become the basis of wider, more public connections.

Upon its publication in 2000, *White Teeth* seemed to capture the joy and positivity of the new millennium's multiculturalism, depicting a London in which diverse communities experienced occasional failures of intercultural communication but also festive celebrations of difference. *White Teeth*'s "multiculturalism for the millennium" looked to the future proudly and self-confidently. Now, more than fifteen years later, the mood in Europe—and, it seems, more broadly in the West—regarding immigration, integration, and multiculturalism has fundamentally

changed and become more troubled. Over the years, terrorist attacks in major urban centers such as New York, London, Madrid, Paris, and Brussels, as well as large numbers of refugees fleeing war-torn countries, have heightened societal tensions, especially over the position Islam occupies or could occupy in Europe. At the same time, governments responded to the 2007-2008 credit crunch with significant budget cuts and austerity measures, further increasing socioeconomic pressures. This cultural atmosphere has resulted in antagonisms that cast members of (other) communities as outsiders, relegate them to marginal positions, and forego dialogue, instead combining conceptions of fundamental difference with feelings of superiority.

Published within this sociopolitical context, *NW*, as Wendy Knepper argues, "registers the anxious dynamics of a globalizing neighbourhood."[5] Theses dynamics play out within the novel and are constituted by boundaries instilled by class, race, and ethnicity. In *NW*, the idea of race collaborates with those of ethnicity and class to form a strongly racialized logic through which the (second generation) immigrant's upward mobility is subtly but decisively affected. As such, the novel represents a London society that in many ways attempts to transition to a decolonial space but for now remains rather strongly postcolonial.[6] As Sandra Ponzanesi and Bolette B. Blaagaard explain, "To read Europe as a postcolonial place does not imply that Europe's imperial past is over, but on the contrary that Europe's idea of self, and of its polity, is still struggling with the continuing hold of colonialist and imperialist attitudes."[7] European societies are filled with colonial remains, whose influence and continuing hold on the present often go unacknowledged.[8] Robert Young thus argues for attending to Europe's "postcolonial remains" to make "the invisible visible."[9] Similarly, Graham Huggan writes that postcolonial studies has begun "regenerating itself" by examining "the extent to which both colonial legacies and new forms of colonialism, some of these operating under the rubric of globalization, are impinging powerfully on both individual nations and [Europe] as a whole."[10] Increasingly, Young signals, postcolonial

critics have shifted their attention away from the original idea of colonialism as "an activity on the periphery, economically driven" to new forms of colonialism in European societies, which are sometimes referred to as neo-colonialism or internal or reverse colonialism.[11]

Gilroy argues that Britain's inability to come to terms with the loss of its empire has resulted in "postcolonial melancholia" (p. 125). He explains that in a melancholic culture, the "infrahuman political body of the immigrant . . . comes to represent all the discomforting ambiguities of the Empire's painful and shameful but apparently nonetheless exhilarating history" (pp. 109-10). As Neil Roberts puts it, "Britain's postimperial, postcolonial melancholia designates a condition whereby the current polity's repeated failure to let go of a long gone imperial past reproduces in the present an imperial impulse."[12] This impulse, indeed, is targeted at immigrants. Regardless of whether immigrants come from a country that was once colonized by Britain, the melancholic society rejects them and opts instead for discourse that represents Britain as what Heather Fielding describes as a "homogenous, pastoral nation."[13] In contrast to a melancholic society, however, Gilroy posits a convivial one that stresses the "processes of cohabitation and interaction" that characterize everyday encounters with diversity and cosmopolitanism in many contemporary urban centers (p. ix). The geographer Doreen Massey has coined the term "throwntogetherness" in this context, signifying the densely packed combination of human visions, worldviews, and trajectories in large cities.[14] Conviviality engages with this variety of voices rather than ignoring or actively countering them. Tolerance and openness are central tenets of a convivial society, which is informed by a certain social spontaneity. With the concept of conviviality, then, Gilroy argues for living together as equals. It is easy to regard the distinction between the convivial and the melancholic modes as being an either/or logic in which one is either convivial or melancholic; however, as Fielding has convincingly shown, both modes are often incorporated into and represented in literary narratives

(p. 202). Similarly, as we will see, although *NW* incorporates melancholic outbursts of violence, it is grounded in an inclusive, convivial ethics.

Smith confronts postcolonial melancholia and suggests a path to conviviality through Forster's modernist edict to "only connect." The influence of modernism—a movement that developed during another time of crisis between world cultures—on Smith's work has generated much discussion on how to frame and place her literary projects. Smith was first understood as a broadly postmodern author, whose literary lineage includes the English comic novel and late twentieth-century authors (especially David Foster Wallace).[15] However, the perception of her work has since shifted. In recent years, scholars have identified literary modernism as an influence on Smith's work. *NW*'s narrative structure, for example, has been linked with the works of high modernists Virginia Woolf and James Joyce: the second section of *NW* takes us through one day in the life of a character, echoing both Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), while the set-up of the novel's third section references *Ulysses*, especially the "Aeolus" chapter.[16] These sections succinctly show Smith's control over and play with time in her work; she couples *longue durée* histories in a fragmented *Bildungsroman*-fashion with the intimate minutiae of life on a single day. This playful juxtaposition of the present moment with a long past is also on display in *White Teeth*, whose plot is set mostly between the 1970s and 1990s but whose chapter titles indicate times as far back as 1857 (the Indian Rebellion) and 1907 (the earthquake in Kingston, Jamaica). These dates are important to the novel's characters and influence their present actions. Similarly, *NW* plays with the interrelation of past events and potential futures.

After the publication of her essay "Love, Actually" (2003; later collected in *Changing My Mind*, 2009) and her third novel *On Beauty* (2005), Smith's indebtedness to and professed love

for the works of Forster were more fully emphasized in critical discourse. Fiona Tolan, for instance, shows the indebtedness of Smith's narratives to Forster's ethical humanism, writing

> By being so determinedly in-the-world, by not being good but rather by learning to fail better, Smith's characters move closer to achieving Forster's vision of connection, and in doing so exemplify Smith's belief in "the great, humane basis of the English comic novel."[17]

In *Howard's End*, Forster's humanist ethic employs personal relations to overcome the class and cultural divisions between the the Wilcoxes, Schlegels and Basts, with Margaret, the eldest Schlegel sibling, striving to help Henry Wilcox:

> She would only point out the salvation that was latent in his own soul, and in the soul of every man. Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die. (p. 159)

Margaret's immediate problem lies in the disconnect between between one's private passions and public personality, between erotic transgressions and behavioral conventions. In critical discourse, however, the passage's specific context has been largely ignored, and "only connect" has come to stand for a broader desire for connection and, in Gilroy's terminology, conviviality. In line with Margaret's sermon, the dictum can refer to the active overcoming of isolation, on which dark and destructive forces feast. (The cultured, bourgeois Schlegels probably view monks as outdated, representing conservative and backward looking religion.) The connection of "prose" and "passion"—of two fragments, elements earlier disconnected—brings life to both. Central is human love, or the faculty to see each other as humans and as equals. Thus, Tolan describes Forster's influence on Smith's work as a sense of "being in and of the world, rather than at some

philosophical remove from the everyday . . . . it is for the quality of [her characters'] personal relations that they are judged" (p. 143). Tolan places the moral imperative to "only connect" at the heart of Smith's early novels—an argument that I extend to *NW*.

NW is centered on four characters: Leah Hanwell, Natalie Blake (who is also known as Keisha), Felix Cooper, and Nathan Bogle. The novel opens with a section titled "Visitation," narrated from Leah's point of view in a complex stream of consciousness. We find her listening to the radio, trying to write down a lyric she hears with a pencil: "I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me" (p. 3). However, the glossy cover of the magazine she scribbles on resists—"Pencil leaves no mark on magazine pages"—thus, she is unable to write down the complete line, never making it past "I am the sole" (p. 3). Rather than asserting that she is the author of her own life, Leah instead claims a certain loneliness—and consequently gives up writing. This image presents in a light-hearted manner the struggles that will be central to *NW*: How free are the novel's characters to make decisions? Are they the masters of their own lives or rather subjugated to societal forces they cannot control? "Visitation" follows Leah as she tries to negotiate her daily life, from dealings with the drug addict Shar, who filches thirty pounds from her, to her efforts to (re)connect with Natalie. *NW*'s second section, "Guest," follows Felix Cooper, a young filmmaker, on his day through London. At the end of his part, in act of unexpected, melancholic violence, he is stabbed and left for dead. "Host," the novel's third and most substantive section, comprised of 185 short, titled chapters, follows Natalie Blake from childhood to adulthood. We see her struggle as she grows up in a small and deprived council estate in the Willesden area of NW (the postcode North-West London), develops ambitions that will take her away from the estate, adopts a less racially marked name, and becomes a barrister. She marries Frank, a successful lawyer. Natalie, too, is successful at the Inns of Court, but she feels she is missing something. She feels inadequate, as if she has betrayed her roots by moving

away from the Caldwell council estate to a supposedly better area of Willesden. The section breaks off when Frank discovers an email address Natalie has been using to arrange anonymous sex with young black men. The "Crossing" section belongs to both Natalie and her old classmate Nathan Bogle as they walk through parts of northwest London, from Willesden up to Hampstead Heath. *NW*'s fifth and final section, again titled "Visitation," brings us back to Leah, who is joined by Natalie. Both of their marriages having known better times; they talk to each other again and decide to call the police to voice their suspicion that Nathan was one of Felix's murderers. The two women reconnect, as in their youth, "two heads pressed together over a handset" (p. 294).

In striving to make connections, each of these characters must contend with the tension between their pasts and their futures, between what Gilroy elsewhere terms "roots" and "routes."[18] Discussing cultural identification, Stuart Hall characterizes one's identification with one's "roots" as establishing "stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning."[19] These frames of reference are grounded in a community that arises from shared historical experiences and culture, with all the common codes that come with such emergence. If one orients oneself towards "routes"—or paths forward—the future becomes as important as the past. As Hall states, identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (p. 225). Consequently, transformation and change are possible, allowing for a future to be shared even if a past is not. In *NW*, many of its multi- or bi-racial characters strive for a future-focused identity-building process but, time and again, find an anxious society emphasizing roots, opposing them.

The continuing pull of roots is strongly represented by place in *NW*—both the local communities in which the characters grew up and the wider setting of postcolonial London. According to John McLeod, "postcolonial London" emerges "at the intersection . . . between the material conditions of metropolitan life and the imaginative representations made of it."[20] Much

of London's material conditions—its inner city, monuments, and buildings—arose during and are continuing reminders of Britain's imperial conquests between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, thus offering a stark contrast with its postimperial and multicultural body of inhabitants. The literature of postcolonial London finds fertile soil in the tension between the city's buildings and its people, between the city as a place regulated by the past and the city as a space free for innovation and creation. The city as a place of innovation is where Natalie negotiates her own story and identity. Important here is Michael Keith and Malcolm Cross's notion of "the racialization of space," referring to the construction of space in racialized terms, which in turns allows for people to be literally put in place.[21] *NW* forcefully asserts a relation between specific neighborhoods in London and the ethnic or racial background of the people who live there. *NW*'s characters are not only held back by the place in which they live but more strongly by characteristics and traits that are associated with that place—characteristics that are colored by prejudice and stereotype.

Three main characters—Natalie, Leah, and Felix—are the "other" to a society filled with "postcolonial melancholia." Natalie is of Jamaican descent and Leah is Irish, while Felix is also of Caribbean descent. Subsequently, they are a constant reminder of Britain's past imperial ventures and its changed status in the present. They all try to escape from race and racism but are prevented from breaking with their pasts entirely. They are continually pulled back to NW, to Willesden; although at times the novel ventures into other parts of the city, Marcus rightly points out that "like a released top, Smith's narrative spins out in ever-widening circles but never drifts too far from its geographic center."[22] Drifting too far from the geographic center seems, in fact, punishable. Felix Cooper goes to central London, where the tourists are, only to find his demise on the way back home. Natalie's efforts to move away from Caldwell are less fatal but just as futile; as we learn in "Host," she goes to study in Bristol, only to return to Willesden when she is

done. In the next section, she walks up to Hampstead Heath, together with Nathan Bogle, but in the end, she finds herself back where she began. The spinning top moves away from its center but then comes back. Significantly, the novel's widest excursion—to Bristol—is contained in the flashbacks of "Host," casting Natalie's life outside London firmly in the past and solidifying the narrative in the present. From these movements, Marcus concludes that "we may still be free to choose how we want to speak, but many of us are not able to choose how we want to live. . . . [Smith's] characters' lives are ultimately determined by where they grew up" (p. 72). Leah, Natalie, and the others are strongly grounded by their roots, which disable or negate the freedom and control they would like to have in their lives.

The "roots" of the past conflict with the future "routes" that the characters in *NW* are looking to follow. Natalie is the character who most tries to transform her roots into routes. In a clear break from her past, she moves away from Caldwell and adopts a name that connotes no particular ethnicity or race—and thus, we might say, suggests whiteness. Natalie is upwardly mobile; in contrast to Leah, who is arguably so rooted in Caldwell that she becomes trapped there, Natalie has gone out into the world. As she is reading law, however, she finds that she can still be objectified and demeaned because of the color of her skin. When she is asked to take a place a defense team, she feels pride that her strategy—"Do good work. Wait for your good work to be noticed"—has paid off until she sees that the family of the defendant are "unmistakably Jamaican" (p. 205). It becomes clear why she was told, "Don't worry, you won't have to do anything, just look pretty" (p. 205). Natalie is being used to make the white men on the defense team look more believable and neutral, and it destroys Natalie's "innocence and pride" (p. 205).

From the outside, it appears that Natalie has succeeded; she has moved to one of the more posh areas of NW, married, and had two children. Yet her success leaves her feeling disconnected and, indeed, rootless. Trying to overcome her roots has stripped her of her identity.

Put in Forsterian terms, Natalie has lost the meaningful and meaning-making connections to others around her. Alberto Fernández Carbajal perceives an "unravelling of identities" in *NW*, which is "intimately connected with issues of British national identity . . . neither [Leah nor Natalie] fits a singular notion of Britishness."[23] Natalie's efforts to fit this notion of Britishness disconnect her from the identity she did have. In Carbajal's analysis, Natalie is dislocated, in terms of both ethnicity and class, with which she has an ambiguous or problematic relationship. Her internal strife is expressed through the email address she creates to have extramarital sex with strangers: "KeishaNW@gmail.com." Notably, the address connects Natalie's former name Keisha with the neighborhood in which she still lives but to which she feels less and less connected. She effectively creates an avatar that consists of her former identity and places it in contemporary virtual reality.[24] When Frank finds one of her emails, he asks "What the fuck is this? Fiction?" followed by "Who *are* you?" and "You have two children downstairs. You're meant to be a fucking adult. Who are you? Is this real?" (p. 259). These questions point exactly to Natalie's own concerns; the issue of realness—or, in today's vocabulary, authenticity—is one that proves difficult for Natalie/Keisha. Early on, even Leah wonders about her friend—"Who is she? Who is this person?"—expressing an alienation from the girl she knew from her childhood onwards (p. 58). Leah and Frank touch upon Natalie's own conflicted feelings about her roots and routes, about where she fits in.

In another powerful scene, Natalie tries to find a connection to London, the city she describes as "home" (p. 269), after Frank finds out about her second, online life. Fernández Carbajal reads this scene as an update of *Mrs Dalloway*, in which Clarissa Dalloway connects with the city around her. Of course, Clarissa and Natalie do not inhabit or connect with the same parts of the city. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf places this moment of connection in central London, Shaftesbury Avenue to be precise; Smith relocates to NW. Natalie's location and immigrant

background complicate her connection with the city in which she lives. Fernández Carbajal points out Natalie's "conflicted identity as a black British citizen whose claims to London's ownership paint a complex picture . . . of pains and pleasures, terrors and contentments" (p. 84). Whereas Clarissa feels connected to everything and everywhere, Natalie has the sensation that "it was almost pleasant, strolling to nowhere" (p. 273). The contrast between everywhere and nowhere is as stark as it can be. During her walk, Natalie feels connected to nothing, not even herself: "walking was what she was . . . . She had no name, no biography, no characteristics" (p. 264). Later, as she walks past Caldwell with Nathan, she tries to recall the past but cannot:

> As she walked she tried to place the people back there, in the house, into the present current of her thought. But her relation with each person was now unrecognizable to her and her imagination—due to a long process of neglect, almost as long as her life—did not have the generative power to muster an alternative future for itself. All she could envision was suburban shame. (p. 266)

This meditative state of mind leads Natalie—or Keisha, as Nathan keeps referring to her—to a sense of "suburban shame." In a way, walking brings her out of the world but, at the same time, closer to the world she has left behind and that still affects and occupies her. If Natalie's problem has been keeping things real (during their trip Nathan says, "I ain't in your dream, Keisha. You're in mine"), breaking away and retreating into "the present current of her thought" might be a solution, as it brings her closer to her inner identity, not to some persona she has had to adopt (p. 279).

Despite being separated from the world around her, Natalie judges the fractured and diverse urban landscape she encounters as "almost pleasant," which suggests a certain degree of connection with the city. As they walk "up into money," she is attentive to the changing socioeconomic circumstances (p. 273). Council estates give way to richer Victorian houses.

Natalie's "home," then, Fernández Carbajal notes, is a "place of accentuated contrasts and conflicting surfaces," in which she shows "an awareness of insoluble difference in the city's conflicted economic landscape" (p. 85). The trance- or dream-like state that walking induces for Natalie, along with Nathan's frequent allusions to dreaming and (un)reality bring to the fore the question of what is actually real and what is imagined or dreamt about their walk . If it was a dream, what is the value of the connection Natalie feels to London? Such a connection is, ultimately, not only problematic but also unconvincing. The possibility of a better future starts not with Natalie connecting with London (a public, material connection) but in her reconnecting with Leah (an interpersonal connection).

Natalie's difficulty connecting with the city and her past community is exacerbated by the racism of a postcolonial melancholic society. Huggan identifies "so-called 'race relations'" as a key area in which old and new colonialisms manifest themselves and are resisted (p. 243). Following a number of semantic shifts and redefinitions, Huggan follows Stephen Castles in arguing that "racism" can now be understood as "racism without race" (p. 243).[25] Racist forms of exclusion and domination are no longer grounded in supposedly "naturalized" or "biological" features but rather consist of "a set of highly flexible 'forms of social normalisation and exclusion which are intrinsic to capitalism and globalised modernity'" (p. 243). Consequently, racism is no longer expressed as a biological hierarchy in which one group—traditionally, the white center—is superior to another—the marginalized black periphery—but as a set of insurmountable cultural differences. In the racist imaginary, even though various cultural groups may live together in one society, it is impossible to speak of coexistence. Contemporary racism finds its grounding in a similar though adapted logic that for many Europeans justified colonial and imperial expansion, especially during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but rather than being based on supposed biological differences, "racism without race" adopts a culturalist logic. At the same

time, Avtar Brah argues for caution; instead of merely "delineat[ing] the transformations" of racisms from the past to the present and understanding discrimination against various groups as "parallel racisms," it is better to think of the "intersecting configurations" of racism, which allows us to be attentive to differing temporal and spatial positionings of attitudes towards specific groups.[26]

Gilroy's and Huggan's projects show how the racialized logic that ordered the colonial world continues in a different guise in our own postcolonial world. Indeed, there are many commonalities and continuities between the two. Gilroy identifies the "migrancy problematic" as a new version of what Aimé Césaire sixty years ago called Europe's "colonial problem."[27] Gilroy argues that the immigrant's body has come to represent "the ambivalence of empire"; immigrants are physical manifestations of the colonial and imperial past (p. 110). Even if the immigrant does not hail from one of Britain's former imperial possessions, the anxieties and ambivalences about the loss of that empire are nevertheless projected on to him or her. Therefore, Gilroy contends, immigrants not only represent the imperial past, "but also refer consciousness to the unacknowledged pain of its loss and the unsettling shame of its bloody management" (p. 110). This reminder makes it difficult for immigrants to become part of a nation, which is nostalgic for a supposedly old and homogeneous Great Britain.

Gilroy's observations can be contextualized alongside Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein's characterization in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (1991) of racism arising out of nationalist sentiments. The idea of a particular (Western) European identity only started developing when the contact between European peoples and their non-European colonial subjects intensified and a set of national differences was discursively created. Importantly, these nationalist sentiments are directed "not only towards the exterior but towards the interior."[28] Racism directs its attention not merely to other nations, but also to "unwanted" groups inside its

nation-state. Nationalism thus functions not just as a tool to construct *inter*national differences but also works to create a hierarchy *inside* the nation on the basis of race and ethnicity. In our current moment of migration and change, "there" has become "here," to borrow Gilroy's metaphorical descriptions once more (p. 100). Imbuing the present space and time with imaginings of the colonial past, nationalism turns into racism at home, and starts to eat into interpersonal relations there.

NW posits interpersonal relationships as a way to resist postcolonial melancholia and shift society toward conviviality. Natalie's and Leah's lives within the timeframe of the narrative are bookended by instances of connection. The first, when they are four, forges bonds across lines of racial antagonism, and the second, when Natalie and Leah come together over a phone call, helps Natalie reconnect to her past. When they were four, "there had been an event" (p. 151). The significance of this event was two-fold: Keisha saved Leah from drowning in a pool, and Leah's mother Pauline "thanked Marcia Blake [Keisha's mother] many times" (p. 151). Not only do the two girls begin a life-long connection after this near-fatal incident, but the "event" is also the starting point for two different immigrant communities to come together, despite "deep-seated racial prejudice" that maintains and reinforces difference (Carbajal, p. 80). Racism not only separates Irish and Jamaican immigrants from mainstream British society, it also sets the two groups against each other and prevents them from creating a unified front to confront that racism. As a result, they do not rally together, but try to find their own way through life.[29] It takes an "event" to change this status quo, however temporarily.

When Leah and Natalie reconnect after growing apart in their teens, Natalie is living among the broken pieces of her marriage with Frank and comes to talk to Leah, who refuses to talk to her husband Michel. Natalie sees her friend is in trouble and moves to pull her out of her loneliness. The situation recalls the event that kick-started their friendship: "You were the only

one saw she was in trouble," Keisha's mother said of her saving Leah (p. 151). This motif of seeing as not only looking at somebody, but also understanding what they need returns in the novel's final pages, as Natalie "spotted Leah lying in the hammock in the garden, totally exposed," without anyone to turn to (p. 291). Leah is as vulnerable as she was in the pool. It seems as if she has caught up with the hard realities of life: "I just don't understand why I have this life . . . . You, me, all of us. Why that girl [Shar, the drug addict] and not us. Why that poor bastard [Felix] on Albert Road. It doesn't make sense to me" (p. 292).[30] Natalie tries to come to an answer: "We wanted to get out. . . . I'm sorry if you find that answer ugly, Lee, but it's the truth" (p. 293). Her answer reflects the neoliberal idea that because Leah and Natalie worked harder and wanted more, they managed to escape Shar's and Felix's fates. Natalie's answer is not all that convincing, considering her struggles at work and with a loss of her sense of self. Natalie's own history can be read as a story of socioeconomic betterment in which a young, black girl finds a place at the Inns of Court, a symbol of British statehood; however, such a reading leaves out the ways in which class and social mobility in postcolonial Europe is often racialized. Natalie's position is in many ways an exception that obscures the lives of others who work equally hard but do not find similar success and acclaim. Finding the way up is not only a question of individual success or failure but also a feat of society and of community. Through equalized opportunities for education and employment, for instance, a society can help everybody up, not just particular individuals. In a society marked by postcolonial melancholia, the meritocratic ideal—or even, perhaps, ideology—expressed by Natalie is constantly subverted by the twinned issues of class and ethnicity, which pull some people down no matter their efforts. It is not always possible to climb higher through working harder when one's appearance elicits, consciously or not, fear and suspicion among fellow employees, employers, and customers.

Natalie has tried to become a "self-made" woman and to work her way up the socio-economic ladder. She stands for and defends this ideal, which could be extended to British society as a whole. If routes were determined only by hard work and not by roots, Gilroy's convivial society could be achieved more quickly. Conviviality, for Gilroy, rises from "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" and rejects the idea of a "closed, fixed, and reified identity" (p. xi). Conviviality is defined, in Fielding's assessment, by an openness to difference, encounters, and "sympathetic identification" (p. 203). *NW* looks at cohabitation and interaction within the London postal code NW, where people meet and encounter certain "others" every day. Although there is the continuous danger of "contingent and unexpected violence," as exemplified in Felix's murder, there is also the possibility of equality, connection, and conviviality.[31] In *NW* as in much of Smith's work, these ideals are located in a moment inspired by Forster's urge to "only connect."

In the novel's closing pages, when Leah and Natalie together tip off the police about Nathan, Natalie initiates their act of justice, saying, "I think I know what happened in Albert Road" (p. 293). Insisting that passing Nathan's name on to the police is "the right thing to do" (p. 293), they phone their local police station:

> Leah found the number online. Natalie dialed it. It was Keisha who did the talking. Apart from the fact she drew the phone from her own pocket, the whole process reminded her of nothing so much as those calls the two good friends used to make to boys they liked, back in the day, and always in a slightly hysterical state of mind, two heads pressed together over a handset. (p. 294)

This conceptually rich passage points to a complex and collapsing time-space. Under the banner of justice, "the two good friends" come together in a way that reminds one of them of their past

calls to boys. Who is reminded of this history and brings it into the present remains unclear; although Keisha/Natalie makes the phone call, the "she" in this sentence stands in stark contrast with the use of proper names before. I would argue that this passage at least allows for overlapping and merging points of view and timelines. Leah's and Natalie's separate identities cease to exist (Natalie already carried two identities: the successful, forward-looking lawyer, who went by Natalie, as well as Keisha, the unfaithful spouse oriented to the past). This spiritual or psychological coming-together is mirrored in the physical act of touching heads, which is brought forward from their past. Leah's and Natalie/Keisha's perspectives fuse as well; both are reminded of their teenage acts of human love. This time, Leah/Natalie/Keisha make a call for justice. Unsurprisingly, human love and justice are integral to—indeed, form the core of—both Forster's dictum "only connect" and Gilroy's convivial society.

In *NW*'s closing pages, Forster's ethical humanism meets Gilroy's postcolonial humanism. "Only connect" is an effective philosophy not only for accepting multicultural society but also for encountering all difference. Connecting is a socioethical responsibility. As Gilroys states, "the immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there," and that entangled reality requires new structures of engagement and awareness that recognize the challenges posed by movement from a colonial to a postcolonial to a decolonial society.[32]

NW shows us that the past is always entangled with the present. As a literary artefact, the novel engages, takes issue with, and transforms a long tradition of cultural interactions. This lineage is not just background but in fact crucial for the novel's outcome. Smith renews Forster's humanist impulse and positions a simple reconnection between old friends, built on an old sense of security and mutual trust, as a possibility of future equality. Leah and Natalie's reconnection affects the reader, for they have been witness to the characters' pasts and the difficulties they have encountered in recasting their roots—both their own pasts as well as their pre-histories (the

histories of immigration bringing their forefathers and mothers to Britain)—as their routes. As such, *NW* suggests that private betterment—that is, the renewed amical bonding between Leah and Natalie/Keisha—is a prerequisite to them calling the police and probably setting in motion a process of justice.

Reading *NW* through the lens of Gilroy's postcolonial melancholia attunes us to these histories, which always intersect between private and public personas, and their influence on the painful present, but it also allows us to envision the alternative convivial society, grounded in personal bonds and relationships. Thus, even though *NW* is not necessarily an optimistic novel, for at times it is rather bleak, it ends with a hopeful image and the possibility of freedom. Young captures that freedom in the promising assertion that "the twenty-first century is already the century of postcolonial empowerment," while David Marcus argues that *NW* expresses the freedom "to narrate [the characters'] determinacy in their own way."[33] Before it can become a societal reality, convivial life starts with personal connection.

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NOTES

[1] Zadie Smith, *NW* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), 293. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[2] E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, ed. David Lodge (London: Penguin, 2000), 159; and Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004), xi. Subsequent references to both will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[3] Dominic Head, "Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: Multiculturalism for the Millennium," in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. Richard Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 106-19. Ulrike Tancke writes that *White Teeth* "almost instantly became canonical, as an epochal novel celebrating the heterogeneity of British urban society around the millennium"; see Tancke, "*White Teeth* Reconsidered: Narrative Deception and Uncomfortable Truths," in *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond*, ed. Tew (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 27.

[4] See Fiona Tolan, "Zadie Smith's Forsterian Ethics: *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, *On Beauty*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary's Literature*, 2 (2013), 135-46.

[5] Wendy Knepper, "Revisionary Modernism and Postmillennial Experimentation in Zadie Smith's *NW*," in *Reading Zadie Smith*, 112.

[6] There is an extensive discussion on the differing meanings of "postcolonial" and "decolonial." A good starting point is Gurminder K. Bhambra, "Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues," *Postcolonial Studies*, 17 (2014), 115-21. Bhambra briefly outlines the different historical trajectories of postcolonial and decolonial knowledge production, the former developing in Western academia through the work of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, and the latter mostly by scholars connected to Latin America, such as Walter Mignolo. My juxtaposition of the two terms here suggests a temporal succession to which not all scholars would subscribe; my usage echoes the various movements to "decolonize the university," which started at the University of Cape Town in 2015 and aim to move beyond the fruits of postcolonial criticism and divest Western universities of colonial remnants. See Gurminder K. Bhambra,

Kerem Nisancioglu and Dalia Gebrial, eds., *Decolonizing the University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[7] Sandra Ponzanesi and Bolette B. Blaagaard, "In the Name of Europe," introduction to *Deconstructing Europe: Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Ponzanesi and Blaagaard (London: Routledge, 2012), 4.

[8] Though my article focuses on the lingering impact of imperial policies within the European nations that implemented them, I do not intend to diminish the more profound damage done to those nations subjected to those policies. Discussing the sustained influence of past practices of domination on the present in former colonies, Ann Laura Stoler speaks of "ruination," a term that succinctly describes the processual—and damaging—nature of the past on the present; see Stoler, preface to *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), ix.

[9] Robert Young, "Postcolonial Remains," *New Literary History*, 43 (2012), 23.

[10] Graham Huggan, "Perspectives on Postcolonial Europe," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 44 (2008), 242. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[11] Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 17.

[12] Neil Roberts, "Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*," *Shibboleths*, 2 (2008), 164.

[13] Heather Fielding, "Assimilation After Empire: Marina Lewycka, Paul Gilroy, and the Ethnic Bildungsroman in Contemporary Britain," *Studies in the Novel*, 43 (2011), 202. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[14] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 149.

[15] See Tew, *Zadie Smith*, 62; and Paul Giles, "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53 (2007), 327-44.

[16] See Alberto Fernández Carbajal, "On Being Queer and Postcolonial: Reading Zadie Smith's *NW* through Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 51 (2016), 76-91.

[17] Tolan, "Zadie Smith's Forsterian Ethics," 144. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[18] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 19.

[19] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 223. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[20] John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004), 7.

[21] Michael Keith and Malcolm Cross, "Racism and the Postmodern City," in *Racism, the City and the State*, ed. Keith and Cross (London: Routledge, 1993), 3.

[22] David Marcus, "Post-Hysterics: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity," *Dissent*, Spring 2013, 71. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[23] Fernández Carbajal, "On Being Queer and Postcolonial," 78. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[24] One might also note the connection with Google's Gmail, an American multinational corporation. The anonymity this company provides is essential for Natalie's undertaking.

[25] Huggan refers to Castles's essay "The Racisms of Globalisation," in *The Teeth Are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural of Australia*, ed. Ellie Vasta and Castles (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 17-45.

[26] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 167. Here, one might think for example of the difference between expressions of racism in Britain

against the Irish, Jews, and African immigrants. As Europeans, Brah argues, the Irish can be said to occupy a "relatively privileged position" with regard to non-white "others" (p. 169).

[27] Gilroy, After Empire, 165, 154. Gilroy is referencing Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950; *Discourse on Colonialism*).

[28] Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London/New York: Verso, 1991), 53.

[29] Hall has elaborated on the first wave of identity politics in the United Kingdom in the mid-twentieth century. See Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalisation and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 41-68.

[30] Shar and Felix were both victims of a system that racially stigmatizes people, a system that also subjugates Leah and Natalie. See Fernández Carbajal, "Queer and Postcolonial," 86.

[31] Pamela McCallum, "Street and Transformation in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and 'Stuart,'" in *Literature for Our Times: Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Ranjini Mendis, Julie McGonegal and Arun Mukherjee (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2012), 487.

[32] For the image of an entangled society, see Kathrin Thiele, "Entanglement," in *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition*, ed. Mercedes Bunz, Birgit M. Kaiser, and Thiele (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2017), 43-48.

[33] Young, "Postcolonial Remains," 20; and Marcus, "Post-Hysterics," 72.